

CHILDREN IN THE CROSSFIRE

YOUTH PARALLEL PROGRAM



Steven (bottom left) works as a journalist for Talking Drums Studio in Sierra Leone

The former child soldiers who attended the conference represented six countries and three continents. They were selected based on their leadership, maturity, and the variety of their experiences both as child soldiers and as part of different demobilization efforts and rehabilitation and reintegration programs. Each was accompanied by a parent/guardian and/or a representative from the organization currently providing them with assistance.



Pelu, J.F.K. High School Student

Students from John F. Kennedy High School were selected based on their interest in the issue of child soldiers, as well as their cultural background. Many of the students' families as well as a number of the students themselves, have lived in or come from the countries represented by the former child soldiers and international delegations attending the conference. They served as cultural liaisons, hosts, and often translators for both the International Youth Delegates and the adults traveling with them.

ON MAY 7 AND 8, 2003, SECRETARY OF LABOR ELAINE L. CHAO HOSTED AN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE, CHILDREN IN THE CROSSFIRE: PREVENTION AND REHABILITATION OF CHILD SOLDIERS, in Washington, D.C.

The conference was intended to raise awareness about the use of child soldiers and promote solutions in the areas of prevention, demobilization, and reintegration. It served as an opportunity for exchange among stakeholders from around the world, including donor governments, United Nations agencies, non-governmental organizations, researchers, the media, and young people who formerly served as child soldiers.

The U.S. Department of Labor has long recognized that youth constitute a significant part of civil society. Inviting young people to share their knowledge, insights, experience, and creativity helps youth to develop important life skills such as problem analysis, problem and conflict resolution, collaboration, communication, and follow-through leading to solutions. For this reason, a group of students from John F. Kennedy High School in Silver Spring, Maryland were invited to join the former child soldiers in a Youth Parallel Program two days prior to the conference. The U.S. and international youth also attended the conference as Youth Delegates.



INTERNATIONAL YOUTH DELEGATES

Radjabu, Burundi
 Fabrice, Burundi
 Steven, Sierra Leone
 Emilia, Sierra Leone
 Mohan, Sri Lanka
 Paul, Uganda
 Grace, Uganda
 Eider, Colombia
 Berta, El Salvador

U.S. YOUTH DELEGATES

Christella, Burundi
 Adam, U.S.A.
 Daniella, Israel
 Pelu, Sierra Leone
 Udara, Sri Lanka
 Andrew, Cambodia
 Veronica, Peru
 Ben, Uganda
 Yasmine, Iran
 Nabila, Pakistan
 Jake, U.S.A.
 Laurel, U.S.A.
 Stephanie, Colombia
 Michelle, Philippines
 Christia, Philippines



The following pages describe this experience using the words, photographs, drawings and ideas of the youth delegates themselves. The U.S. Department of Labor would like to give a special thanks to the students from J.F.K. High School for their assistance in preparing this booklet

PREPARING FOR THE PROGRAM. . .

PRELIMINARY ACTIVITIES

"I grew up in the country of Uganda. I wasn't born during pleasant and happy times but during war times. I had a friend who was a child soldier. We used to go to the same school. His parents died in a car crash and he had to leave school because he couldn't afford the money to pay school fees. So he started living on the streets. I didn't hear from him for two years after he left school. When he came back, he told me that he was kidnapped and forced to be a child soldier. He said that he was beaten and tortured and didn't have enough food to eat. After only two days at school he ran away and I never heard from him again. I came to the United States two years ago and started a new life. I wanted to attend this conference because I wanted to know how to help kids like my friend who didn't have the chances that I had."

U.S. Youth Delegate

U.S. YOUTH

We were really excited when we heard about the conference. Some of us knew about child soldiers because we lived in countries where there were wars or our families came from there, but some of us had never heard about child soldiers.

Before the international youth arrived we wrote letters to them. Some of us knew the languages spoken in Burundi, Sierra Leone, Colombia and El Salvador so we tried to write the letters in a language they could understand and to tell them about ourselves and a little about what they could expect from their trip to the United States.



Christella reads to Adam the letter she wrote in Kirundi

"The fact that the Department of Labor was holding this conference meant that something could really happen with this issue because the Department of Labor is powerful. I thought it was great that they invited international youth because I knew that they would have a lot to teach us." – U.S. Youth Delegate



U.S. Youth Delegates prepare for the arrival of the International youth

"I was afraid that the international youth would reject us because we couldn't understand their situation. I was afraid it would be awkward – that there would be awkward silences and that we wouldn't be what they expected. Their lives were just so different. But I was excited and hoped that they would want to be my friend."

– U.S. Youth Delegate

The day before the international youth arrived, the group of U.S. Youth Delegates met at the Washington Hilton. We decorated the room with welcome signs to make them feel comfortable. We were nervous but we couldn't wait to meet them.



Laurel and Hope (J.F.K. staff) pause to smile while writing letters

INTERNATIONAL YOUTH

We felt very lucky to be chosen to share our stories at the conference in America. We looked forward to meeting other child soldiers from other parts of the world and making friends with youth in the United States. We knew that we would have a lot to tell people at the conference because, although we are young, we have learned from our experiences and we want to help other children by coming up with solutions to the problem of child soldiers.

Before we arrived to the United States we were sent cameras to take photos of our families, friends, schools and other things. We were also told that we could bring artwork and drawings to share at the conference.

“When my father died, I stopped studying. My family was very poor. I joined the army so that I could give my mother money. I worried about leaving them to come to America for the conference but I wanted people to know what was happening in my country.” – International Youth Delegate



Grace with school friends in Uganda



Fabrice with his family in Burundi

When we arrived to the United States, we were overwhelmed, tired, scared, excited and happy.

“Child soldiers face a lot of discrimination in their countries. I was afraid that people in the United States would discriminate against us too. I wanted people to know that we need to be allowed to go to school, join training programs and other services so that we can be productive people like everyone else.”

- International Youth Delegate



Abduction - Uganda

“My friends at World Vision were happy that I was coming to the conference and gave me drawings so that people would know that we need to stop the war and keep children safe.”

- International Youth Delegate



Fighting for Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) - Sri Lanka



Living in Tents - Colombia



Peace - Uganda

MAKING NEW FRIENDS. . .

PREPARATORY MEETING

MAY 5, 2003



Rajabu brings greetings from Burundi

On our first day together, we introduced ourselves and talked about our goals for the week:

- Discover our youth voice and offer youth perspectives at the conference.
- Share experiences and support one another.
- Raise awareness among ourselves and others about this issue and what people are doing to help child soldiers.
- Have fun.

We learned about the Cape Town Principles and read a case study about two child soldiers in a fictional country. Using what we knew from our experiences and what we'd read, we developed our own guide for the prevention, rehabilitation and reintegration of child soldiers.

YOUTH CAPE TOWN PRINCIPLES

PREVENTION:

- Children should be given food, clothing, shelter, education, and financial assistance so that they won't want to join the army or rebel groups because of poverty or injustice.
- There should be more awareness raising so that people know that it is bad to recruit children as soldiers and so that children don't want to be soldiers and so they know the consequences of making children fight.
- Governments, NGOs, international governments, the UN, warring factions and citizens should agree to respect that children are not mature enough to be soldiers, enforce international statutes and punish violators.
- Address the causes of war and involve all parties, including children, in peace efforts.

DEMOBILIZATION:

- Child soldiers should be reassured that they won't be hurt or killed. They should be given special protection away from adult soldiers and should be questioned in private so they aren't punished for telling the truth.
- Demobilized child soldiers should be guaranteed immediate rehabilitation and not be treated like criminals.
- Child soldiers should always be treated with the respect that adults are given and should not be lied to or manipulated. They shouldn't be made promises that can't be kept.
- They should not be made to wait for a long time to find out where their families are, or kept in programs with nothing to do because then they will want to leave and fight or live on the streets.
- All of their basic needs should be taken care of: food, clothing, shelter, and medical and psychological help if they need it.
- Regular community people should be involved in the demobilization process so that children know that it's not just the people working with the programs that care.

REINTEGRATION

- There should be meetings set up with families/communities prior to child soldiers being reintegrated to ensure that they will be received into a safe and loving environment.
- Children should be enrolled in school as soon as possible so that they don't miss out on learning and are the oldest in their classes. They should also be given skills training and help to find jobs.
- Child soldiers should receive individualized training first in small, positive environments and then gradually be reintegrated into regular environments as their comfort level increases.
- Child soldiers can be involved in community service so that they feel like they are doing something good for their community and so that the community sees them as good.
- There should be monitoring so that child soldiers don't feel that they have been abandoned once they are reunited.
- There should be associations of former child soldiers set up so they can support each other.



Youth discuss their role as Youth Delegates

"What I remember about the introductions is that Radjabu really had something to say. [The International Youth] had a real purpose for being here. I was really honored and impressed because they had never been to the United States before but they were standing up in front of us and teaching us. Being with them was so enlightening. Some of them seemed so young. I guess I was thinking that they would be older because they had been through so much. But they were my age. In a lot of ways they seemed just like me." – U.S. Youth Delegate



Secretary of Labor Elaine L. Chao gives a tour of the Department of Labor.

"These remarkable young people have traveled from all around the globe to present the reality of their experiences as only they can. They are here to bear witness for the children who are still in captivity and cannot speak for themselves."

- Secretary Elaine L. Chao

CREATING A YOUTH SPACE . . .

MAY 6, 2003

The next day we visited Washington metropolitan area high schools. A lot of the students already knew about child soldiers because they studied a child soldiers curriculum but they were still very moved by the stories we told.

"I was so nervous speaking to the students but now I think that was my favorite part of the week. Seeing other children who suffered equally like me, gave me confidence to talk about my own experience. Now I think that it is my role in society to inform youth and the world about child soldiers."

– *International Youth Delegate*



Pelu watches Emilia speak to a classroom of students.

JOHN F. KENNEDY
HIGH SCHOOL—Silver Spring, MD

WASHINGTON INTERNATIONAL
SCHOOL—Washington, DC

MONTGOMERY BLAIR
HIGH SCHOOL—Silver Spring, MD

OUR LADY OF GOOD COUNSEL
HIGH SCHOOL—Wheaton, MD

NORTHWESTERN
HIGH SCHOOL—Hyattsville, MD

We ate lunch at the school cafeteria and visited the Washington Monument and Lincoln Memorial. In the evening, we went to a baseball game. Berta was excited because she used to play a similar game in El Salvador before the war.



Grace and Daniella enjoy lunch at J.F.K.



Veronica and Berta with the Orioles Bird.

"The baseball game was the best out of everything. It was so much fun. It broke down a lot of barriers. After we laughed together we could really be friends. It broke the ice because we could talk about something different – baseball. It didn't have anything to do with child soldiers." – *U.S. Youth Delegate*

"The friendship and brotherhood shown to me during my time with the American youth has inspired me to love my own people when I go back to my country."

– *International Youth Delegate*

experience



Youth Delegates at the Washington Monument

"At the Lincoln Memorial one of the International Youth asked me who the man sitting in the chair was. I said that it was President Lincoln and that he was famous because he freed the slaves after the Civil War. The international youth were surprised that the United States had a Civil War."

– *U.S. Youth Delegate*

TELLING OUR STORIES . . .

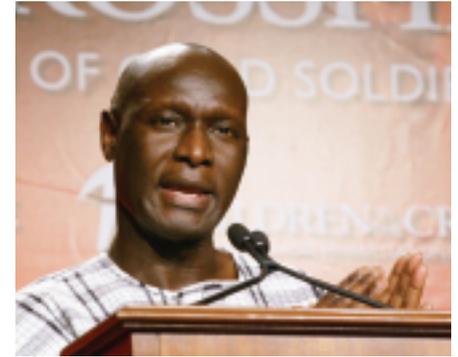
THE CONFERENCE

On the first day of the conference we knew that we were going to be a part of something important.

Before the conference started, Grace and Paul witnessed the signing of a Letter of Agreement between the U.S. Department of Labor, and the Uganda Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development and the Ministry of Education and Sports to work collaboratively on an education project for child soldiers.



US Secretary of Labor, Elaine L. Chao



UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Olara Otunnu

“Secretary Chao seemed very determined. I’m so glad she believes in the cause.”

– International Youth Delegate

“Olara Otunnu was just so passionate. I just felt like he believed in what he was talking about. It was like being in the presence of Gandhi.”

- U.S. Youth Delegate

Steven, Emilia and Berta were invited to speak about their experiences as former child soldiers with Secretary Chao in front of the entire conference. We were very proud of them.



Christella and Fabrice listen to speakers



Youth Round Table Discussion

“I knew that we would be the only youth there and that everyone else would be older and so I tried to look nice and be organized. It was really overwhelming when we arrived. There were so many people there and I wanted to talk to all of them. I can only imagine how overwhelming it was for the international youth. It was overwhelming because this was a big deal.”

– U.S. Youth Delegate



Letter of Agreement Signing

“At first they looked nervous but because they had such a good cause. They’d come from so far away and for just a few days, and this was their big chance to talk and speak - I think that purpose gave them so much confidence. They had been through so much but could talk about it so naturally.”

- U.S. Youth Delegate

overwhelmed

SAYING GOODBYE . . .

The morning after the conference we spent a few more hours together before the international youth had to leave. We realized that we really wanted to stay in touch and that our group had a lot more to offer. We wanted to continue raising awareness about the problem of child soldiers and decided to create a club at John F. Kennedy High School with affiliated clubs all over the world.



Delegates discuss the future

"Before I came to the conference, I thought that the Burundi case was a special case. I was happy to share experiences with youth from other countries and know that I was not alone. I also gained so much in terms of leadership skills. I will talk to young men my age who are still fighting as child soldiers and will convince them to give up."

- International Youth Delegate

Leadership

"I remember that we went around the circle and talked about where we would be next Friday morning and who would be the first person that we would see when we woke up and what we would eat for breakfast. I said that the first person I would see would be my mom and Steven said that he would see his best friend because they shared a bed. And I was reminded that we were all returning to very different places, very different lives." - U.S. Youth Delegate

LOST AND FOUND

Too precious to hold

Too priceless to buy

Life

Wasted with war

Ruined by others

Loss of dreams

Loss of childhood

Life

Regain the strength

Renew the spirit

Fight for your rights

Speak and be heard

Life

Too precious to hold

Too priceless to buy

- Christia,

U.S. Youth Delegate



Stephanie and Paul prepare to leave

When it was time to say goodbye it was really hard. We talked about how we had changed since attending the conference and meeting each other.

Before I came to the conference I felt like a very little person almost with no value. My country didn't help me and I didn't see anything that I could do for my country. I think the best thing

about this week was that I was treated like a human being.

- International Youth Delegate



Mural created by Youth Parallel Program Participants "A World Without Child Soldiers"

CONTINUING THE WORK . . .

It seems like so much has happened in the world since the conference ended in May.

Although Sierra Leone seems to be enjoying peaceful times, there have been serious problems in Liberia, which is only a country away and uses a lot of child soldiers. There is still fighting in Burundi after peace talks between the rebels and the Burundi Government fell apart in September, 2003. The Lord's Resistance Army abducted more children in Northern Uganda last year than in previous years, and we also learned that paramilitary and guerrilla groups in Colombia have recruited more children. There is good news, though. We just heard that UNICEF has started building a child soldiers' center in Sri Lanka.

A lot has happened for the youth delegates from these countries too, both good and bad.



Veronica speaks on a panel on child soldiers at American University

MISSION STATEMENT

Advocates for Children in the Crossfire was established by a diverse group of students from John F. Kennedy High School in Silver Spring, Maryland.

Our actions will benefit former, current and potential child soldiers and their communities.

The John F. Kennedy High School club "Advocates for Children in the Crossfire" has also been busy.

- We wrote a mission statement.
- We made a brochure to give out to people who want to know more about our club and about child soldiers.
- We made a website.
- We wrote an article for the school paper and have contacted reporters from other local papers that wrote articles about our club.
- We created a display at school to let kids know about the issue and our club.
- We hosted a film screening and panel discussion about child soldiers.
- We spoke on a panel at an event for World Refugee Day.
- We've written to the international youth every other month.
- We are raising awareness and raising money for some of the international youth by selling pizza after school and telling other students about the problems of children living in countries in conflict around the world.

Σ

"After we got back to school so many other students started coming up to us saying what can we do for these kids. It was almost like an obligation, like we had just opened up something and there was no keeping it to ourselves.

I felt like in many ways it was just starting." - U.S. Youth Delegate

"I just bought land for my family and want to take a truck driving course and French lessons."

- International Youth Delegate

"I am going to study computers so perhaps we can stay in touch over the Internet."

- International Youth Delegate

"The war in my country is still very dangerous. My uncle has recently disappeared and I am concerned for my family's safety."

- International Youth Delegate

"The program where I was living ran out of money and I had nowhere to stay but now I have found a house. The problem is finding money for rent and for school."

- International Youth Delegate

"I have formed an informal group of former child soldiers in my district."

- International Youth Delegate

LEARNING FROM OTHERS . . .

MAY 7-8, 2003

The next day we listened to other experts talk about strategies for preventing, demobilizing and reintegrating child soldiers. **We learned a lot.**

listened



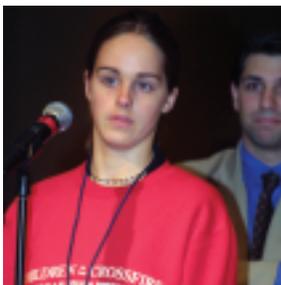
Pelu, Steven and Emilia listen to speakers.

Some of us asked the panelists questions.

“Initially I was not aware that the whole world was against child soldiering, because we see the rebels forcibly recruit children with impunity.”

– International Youth Delegate

“When he said that about needing to create non-military identities, I just thought, yeah. Because I thought if your way of life is like this and you’ve been taught like that since you were little, and then you come to an environment that you are not used to then eventually your spirit will die off because your life will have lost meaning. That’s why education gives children another goal besides to kill something. It’s more positive.” – U.S. Youth Delegate



Laurel asking a question



Marie de la Soudiere

I was so nervous when I asked a question. I felt like I was five. But then I stepped up to the microphone and I had this overpowering voice and I knew that everybody could hear me and it was so cool because then they have to answer our questions.” – U.S. Youth Delegate

PREVENTION

“We need to strengthen non-military identities through the development of appropriate values, through the provision of positive role models ... “

*– Mike Wessells,
Christian Children’s Fund*

DEMOBILIZATION

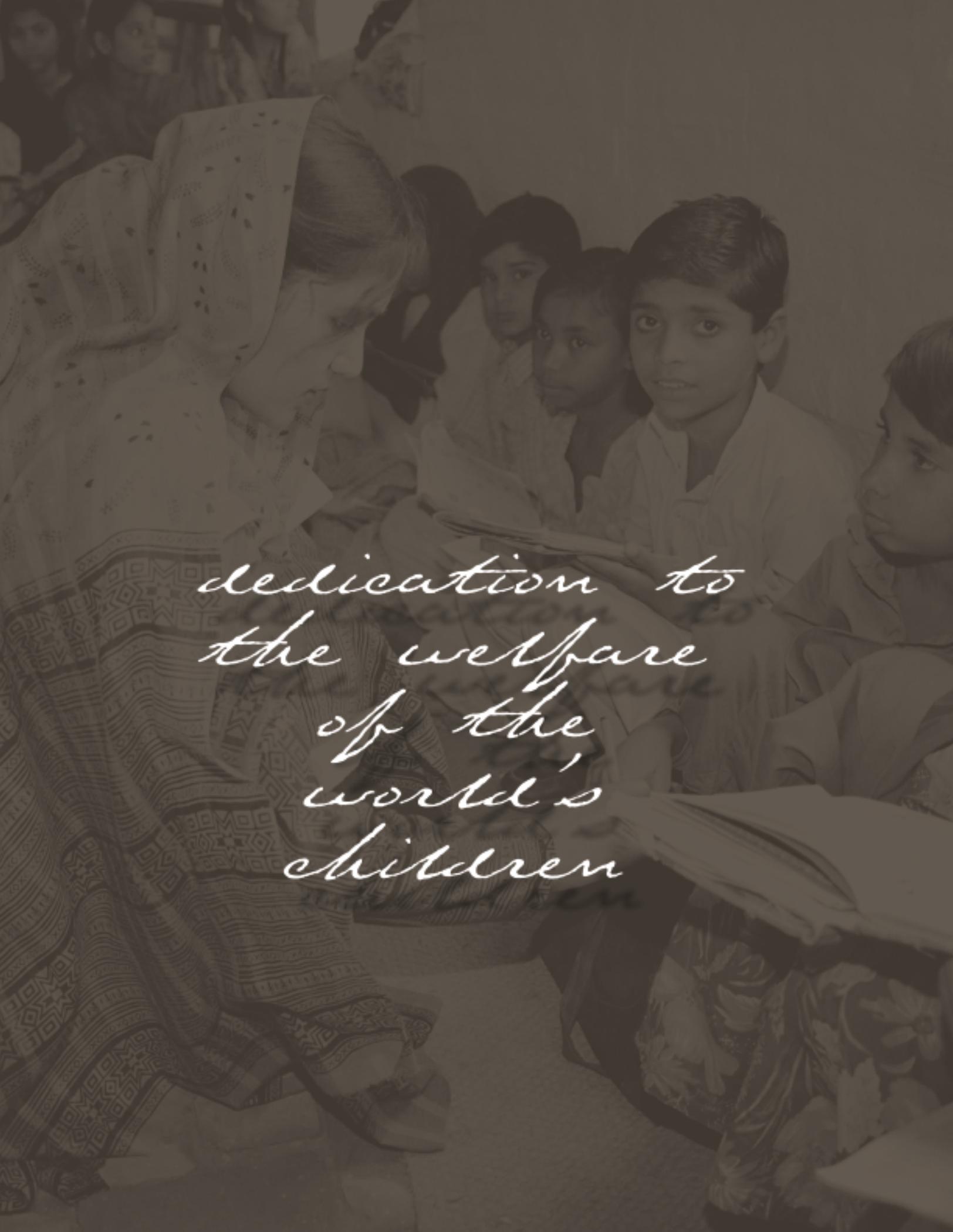
“The involvement of young people themselves in the disarmament affect of demobilization can be an effective way to encourage child soldiers to give up weapons.”

*– Kathy Vandergrift,
World Vision/Canada*

REINTEGRATION

“It is rather extraordinary, even in places where children have committed atrocity right within their village. By and large, the communities and the parents take them back.”

*– Marie de la Soudiere,
International Rescue Committee*

A grayscale photograph of a woman wearing a patterned sari and a headscarf, leaning over a desk to read a book to a group of children. The children are sitting at desks, looking towards the woman. The scene is set in a classroom. The text is overlaid in the center of the image.

*dedication to
the welfare
of the
world's
children*



Club members observe a moment of silence

Every time the Advocates for Children in the Crossfire Club meets we have a moment of silence and light candles for each of the international youth that taught us so much. We don't want to forget them and we want to make sure that other people know about them also.



Emilia in Sierra Leone

Hello

It is Emilia. Do you remember me? Please keep in touch with us even as we are far away. Please be advocating on our behalf so that we can also have the opportunity again to meet with each other in peaceful times to come.

*Your friend,
Emilia*



ADVOCATES FOR CHILDREN IN THE CROSSFIRE WEBSITE

[HTTP://ACIC.JFKCAVS.COM](http://ACIC.JFKCAVS.COM)

The Department of Labor does not endorse, takes no responsibility for, and exercises no control over the organization or its views, or contents, nor does it vouch for the accuracy of the information contained on the destination server.



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